

WACSERIES Op-Ed
No 2 - October 2018

4 Critical Ways to Support the Women's Movement in West Africa

By Jimm Chick Fomunjong



Commonwealth
Foundation





Jimm Chick Fomunjong is a Cameroonian. He has over ten years of experience working with civil society across West and Central Africa. He led the communications department of the West Africa Civil Society Institute between 2012 and 2016. He developed the Institute's communication strategy and led in its implementation during this period. He is currently serving as the Head of Knowledge Management of the WACSI. He has an in depth understanding of the civil society sector in Ghana and West Africa and brings on board a diverse range of experiences from working with CSOs across the continent.

Editorial Team

Charles Kojo Vandyck - Head, Capacity Development Unit, WACSI

Harisson Owusu - Project Officer, Mandela Washington Fellowship

Dr. Fuein Vera Kum - Economic Policy Analyst, Denis & Lenora Foundation, Cameroon

About WACSI

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSERIES

WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSERIES

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

4 Critical Ways to Support the Women's Movement in West Africa

Copyright WACSI 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the Institute except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The Institute requests the use of information in this report be registered with them for impact assessment purposes.

Disclaimer:

WACSI accepts no responsibility for suitability of any materials submitted by the contributors of this publication. WACSI assumes no responsibility or liability for errors or inaccuracies. Contributors accept all responsibility for opinions expressed. Use of this research report constitutes acceptance and understanding of these disclaimers.

For more information, write to:

*West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) No. 9 Bamboo Street (Formerly Bingo Street), East Legon P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota Accra, Ghana
Email: research@wacsi.org Tel: +233 (0) 302 550 224*

Cite as:

Fomunjong, J. C. (2018). 4 Critical Ways to Support the Women's Movement in West Africa. West Africa Civil Society Institute, Accra, Ghana.

To contribute to this publication,
contact
research@wacsi.org
+233(0)501440545



Forty women from diverse walks of life have stressed the need for stakeholders, especially decision makers in Africa to take necessary actions that will create equal opportunities for women on the continent. At a women's dialogue in Accra, they called on African leaders to domesticate international protocols and show appropriate political will to put women at the core of decision making and implementation in African countries. This would afford women the needed opportunities to make invaluable contributions in high level decision making processes.

According to a report from the forum - the West African Women's Dialogue ⁽¹⁾ - that took place in Accra, Ghana, from 10 – 12 July 2018, "women remain disproportionately represented in leadership and decision-making positions despite years of demand for affirmative action and 30% representation in parliament. Domestic violence remains high.

Harmful practices against women and girls including female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage are prevalent across the continent." Observably, some of these unjust acts are perpetrated by men; some of whom sit at the decision-making tables in their countries.

Although this is sadly true, the lack of political will on the part of governments perpetuate such occurrences. Many African governments have endorsed international instruments that promote gender equality. However, being a signatory to these protocols has so far not translated into actionable programmes at country levels.

For example, Mali ⁽²⁾ and Burkina Faso have signed and ratified the convention on the protection of the rights of the child in 1990. By doing this, they have pledged to protect children from violence, any form of abuse,

sexual and economic exploitation. Yet, these countries still record high numbers of victims of FGM. A report ⁽³⁾ published by ⁽⁴⁾ UNICEF in 2013 (pp. 3, 5) holds that 89 per cent of girls and women from Mali had been subjected to FGM. Burkina Faso recorded 76 per cent in the same report. The high prevalence of the practice in these and many other countries in Africa could be attributed to deeply rooted social and cultural norms that inform daily practice.

Socio-cultural norms in West African communities have adverse effects on women. As Osei-Afful ⁽⁵⁾ (2014) argues, "sociocultural norms and practices in Africa continue to be identified as key challenges confronting women's accessing of power and decision making." One of such is patriarchy. During the forum in Accra, participants observed that patriarchy promotes unequal power re-

lations between women and men. It also fosters a culture in which women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. Ahianyos ⁽⁶⁾ (2015) points out that, patriarchal systems create and perpetuate "prejudice and negative social stereotypes against women, which keeps them in a state of almost permanent morbid subordination."

The above barriers to gender equality aren't exhaustive. However, they provide a snapshot of an endemic challenge that needs to be addressed with urgency to unlock West Africa's potential to growth and development. To address the enormous enablers of gender inequality will require tact, focus and commitment. Below are four practical ways stakeholders can explore to address gender inequality in West Africa.

3- This report draws on data gotten from nationally representative surveys in these countries between 1998 – 2010 for Burkina Faso and 1995 – 2010 for Mali. (https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/UNICEF_FGM_report_July_2013_Hi_res.pdf pp. 3, 5)
4- Source: https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/UNICEF_FGM_report_July_2013_Hi_res.pdf
5- Source: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/rhoda_osei_afful_africa_policy_brief_11.pdf
6- Ahianyos, C. (2015). Women's Participation in Politics: The Case of Francophone West Africa, West Africa Insight Vol 2. No. 1, Center for Democracy and Development





1. Create and sustain systems that support women

How are we pragmatically supporting women? Are we deploying the appropriate actions? Have we recessed to assess the effect of our actions on women? Are we just paying lip service and showering diplomatic and political propaganda to the numerous gender inequalities facing women?

And most importantly, what must we prioritise now or do differently to achieve⁽⁷⁾ goal five of the sustainable development goals?

These questions require answers from every individual and stakeholder in our society. Therefore, are you playing your role? If yes, are you playing it well? If not, why not?

It is time for stakeholders to play more active roles in supporting women to be capable and confident to stand and serve as credible leaders in society; from the community where they live in, their respective countries, Africa and the world.

Women need support to become leaders who will work in the interest of their constituents. They should be consciously groomed to develop the right skills and aptitudes to develop critical, context specific and people-centred approaches to address social, economic and political challenges in their communities. These women must be willing to be held accountable. These should constitute an exemplary new generation of leaders who will inspire and realise change in Africa.

During the forum, Nana Afadzinu, Executive Director of WACSI, passionately emphasised the urgent need to develop a tailor-made leadership programme that will target and groom young girls. This will facilitate the process of allowing many younger women to be competent and willing to step into the shoes of the older generation of influential women on the continent.

Furthermore, governments should create a dedicated ministry to manage the affairs of women. The ministry should work with the women's movement to design gender sensitive policies and programmes that promote gender equality and women's rights. This collaboration should adopt a 'feminist awareness approach'. Through this approach, women and men should work together to formulate programmes with the principal goal to change society (Stockemer⁽⁸⁾, 2011, Young, 2000).



2. Resource women's organisations and movements

Technical and financial resources are essential to facilitate a vibrant and functional women's movement in West Africa. At the forum, participants stated that a key limitation to women's active involvement in politics is related to the costly nature of political processes. To address this, participants reiterated the need "to provide direct funding to support women's active participation in politics."

In addition, women's movements should be supported with technical assistance to enable them to drive the desired change they seek. Stakeholders need to invest in long-term capacity strengthening programmes for experienced and potential female politicians in policy making processes. Other areas in which women can be empowered in include;

parliamentary procedures, public speaking, policy analysis, advocacy and lobbying.

"a key limitation to women's active involvement in politics is related to the costly nature of political processes"

"women's movements should be supported with technical assistance to enable them to drive the desired change they seek."



3. Promote information gathering, curation and use

This is a critical moment for stakeholders to leverage on information to strengthen the women's movement. To do this, it becomes critical to document the trajectory of the women's movement and the progression of feminism. This process should detail the successes gained over the years, the rough tides encountered and the lessons that can be drawn from the women's movement to date. This will create a wealth of information that will enable evidence-based actions to ignite and rejuvenate a solution-oriented women's movement, nurturing a more rewarding legacy for generations to come.

A documentation process will provide an in-depth understanding of how for example; Rwandan women were successful in introducing gender equality into the 2003 constitution. It will also explore how this

achievement culminated to a 61.3% representation of women in parliament 10 years later with 49 of 80 seats won by women in the elections of 16 September 2013. Documenting what women did right, how men were mobilised to support women who strive to take leadership positions, the challenges encountered, and key lessons derived from such a success story would inspire and inform women's movements in other parts of Africa.

“it becomes critical to document the trajectory of the women's movement and the progression of feminism. process should detail the successes gained over the years, the rough tides encountered and the lessons that can be drawn from the women's movement to date.”



4. Bridge the inter-generational gap

Today, much is talked about Leymah Gbowee, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize co-winner from Liberia as an influential woman. And of course, she is! But what do we know about Aya Chebbi of Tunisia? Or, Comfort Musa of Cameroon? How can Leymah Gbowee connect with Aya Chebbi and Comfort Musa to support the latter to champion the course in some years to come?

It is very important for younger African women (between the ages of 15 and 35 years) to be given more opportunities to sell their vision for women and girls, their communities and Africa. It is paramount for their works to be recognised in high-level global spaces.

More so, prominent and successful African women leaders should consciously take the responsibility to promote and support the

efforts of younger women. Business women, politicians and women who hold high political office, successful sports women and other women who are fulfilled in life should adopt a 'support 1 African female youth' agenda. Through this, successful women (from 36 years and above) can teach, mentor and coach at least one younger female every two years. This is to transfer skills, knowledge and expertise to the younger generation. It will contribute to inspire, revive and empower the younger generation to realise their full potential and identify their niche to excel despite the systemic challenges women face daily.

This initiative will lend credence to Graça Machel's call to action for women. She encourages young leaders to take the responsibility from the older generation and lead efforts to build a more peaceful and prosperous world. "Let our young leaders take the torch from our hands and lead the way for a more peaceful world", she says.



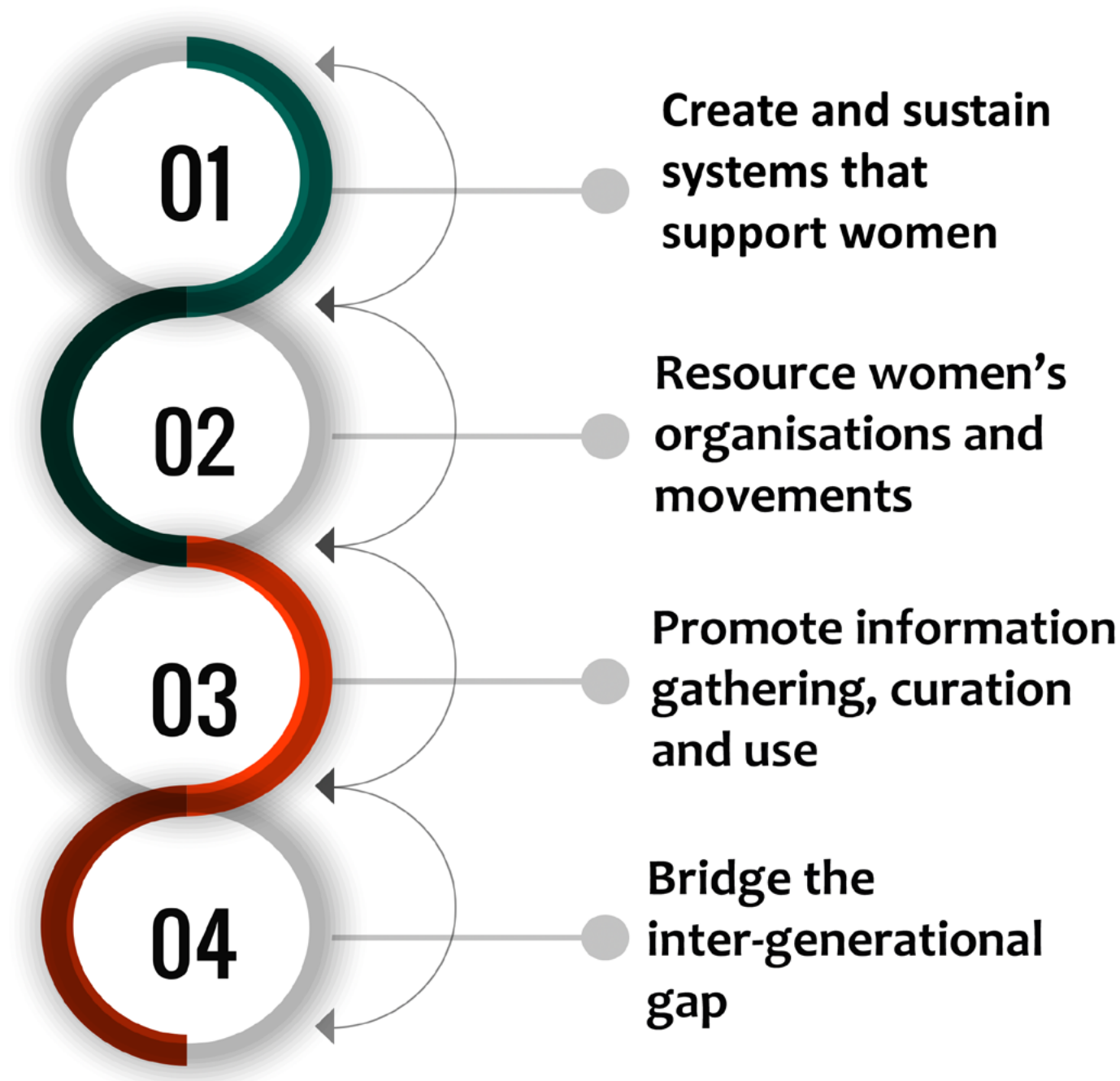
Conclusion

Women must leverage on and apply the theory of presence that holds that female politicians are best suited to represent and respond to the interest of women. The time is now for stakeholders to match words with actions.

There is urgency now, more than ever before, to assess programmes that were implemented to curb the marginalisation of women between the years 2000 and 2015.

The findings should be used to design critical and sustainable approaches that promote gender equality across the region. These actions do not need to end at the level of political discussion tables or diplomatic narratives. They need to be enforced such that, by 2030, we can have evidence to prove that the women's movement in West Africa has been rejuvenated and has made significant contributions to improve the lives of West Africans.

4 Critical Ways to Support the Women's Movement in West Africa



WACSI

Strengthening Civil Society

© WACSI 2018. All rights reserved.



@wacsiorg



WACSIWA



WACSI



@WACSI

